



WALT WHITMAN
QUARTERLY REVIEW

Volume 36 | Number 4 (2019)

pps. 350-353

Jean Huets. With Walt Whitman: Himself in the Nineteenth Century, in America.

Brandon James O'Neil
The University of Iowa

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Recommended Citation

O'Neil, Brandon J. "Jean Huets. With Walt Whitman: Himself in the Nineteenth Century, in America.." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 36 (2019), 350-353. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2340>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walt Whitman Quarterly Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

REVIEWS



JEAN HUETS. *With Walt Whitman: Himself in the Nineteenth Century, in America*. Richmond, VA: Circling Rivers, 2015 (released in paperback, 2018). 194 pp.

On the cover of *With Walt Whitman: Himself*, the 1855 frontispiece stands against a full-color 34-star flag of the United States from Naval History and Heritage Command (this flag is seen in full on page 133). It is a fitting cover for a book that foregrounds Whitman against a richly detailed stitching of American history. Readers of other Whitman biographies will find the opening chapters to be conventional in their story-telling approach, detailing first the various media in which Whitman defined his public persona, and then devoting a chapter to Whitman's immediate family. With chapter three, covering Whitman's "coming of age in Brooklyn," the book begins to widen its perspective, using Whitman's writings about New York as historical eye-witness, rather than autobiography. The following chapters shift dramatically from linear chronology toward various aspects of nineteenth-century Americana—the book's larger historical project—and only periodically return to straight-forward biography until chapter ten on page 151. Beginning with chapter four, "Shaping Forces," the entries in *With Walt Whitman: Himself* become episodic, the book's argument working by accretion; when the reader finally arrives at chapter ten, Whitman's "Coming to Poetry," layer upon layer of historical context have been building toward the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, which is described in one page (155). These entries reinforce Huets's claim that "Walt's prose and poetry are framed by the United States, filled in by the United States, animated by its land, its features and resources, its politics, and its people" (134). Readers follow as "Walt" wefts himself through the celebrities, scandals, and fads of nineteenth-century America, resulting in the weave he called *Leaves of Grass*.

It is perhaps because of this episodic structure that the final chapters feel a bit rushed when returning to a more linear narrative centered on the poet. With chapter eleven, "The Civil War," heavily reliant on

quotations from *Drum-Taps*, letters, and *Memoranda During the War*, a reader might expect the last years of Whitman's life to be handled with similar attention. Post-Reconstruction and Whitman's Old Age, however—commencing with his 1873 stroke and marked by his move to Camden, New Jersey, and growing international fame—receive only one chapter of eight pages. Huets packs the information in, supported by full and quarter-page images that lend interest to an otherwise encyclopedic text. Whitman's passing, for example, is given in one sentence, the only main body on the page: "On March 26, 1892, with Warry and Horace attending, Walt died" (p. 183). The rest of the page is devoted to a nearly full-page photograph of Whitman from 1891 and a caption that turns readers back to an image from 1850 on page 82, thereby setting up the photographs as visual indicators of the book's structural chronology. This final chapter ends with an image handset and printed by Huets of Whitman's promise from "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" that "The strongest and sweetest songs yet remain to be sung," extending that internal chronology into an immense and unknowable future, the same territory into which Whitman often cast his gaze. As the close of a historical text, the line reminds readers that American singers of the present and future continue to respond to the conditions experienced by Whitman—and that to look into the past is to gain insight into that which "yet remains."

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman enjoins his readers to "loudly and musically call me by my nighest name!" Huets takes this invitation seriously, designing a book that aims "to let us join Walt" with an insistence on a first-name basis throughout the text: "Walt treasured the heritage of America's native peoples"; "Walt met Edgar Allan Poe in 1845"; ". . . Walt felt himself to be in his prime." Because of this tone of familiarity, readers with some knowledge of Whitman will perhaps find the text more accessible than readers unfamiliar with his life and writings. For example, Huets writes on page 18 that "Few people possess majesty at age thirty-seven—or at any age—especially, as Alcott observed, in a messy bedroom with a dirty chamber pot in sight," but nowhere does the book provide the story of Bronson Alcott's and Henry David Thoreau's 1856 visit to the poet in Brooklyn. The reader is assumed to know the background of this chamber pot

reference. Huets is clearly knowledgeable on her topic and perhaps expects a readership that is as well, and so allows “Walt” to become a character in the larger story of American history—those cultural aspects that flesh-out an already established view of the poet. He is certainly omnipresent in Huets’s narrative, but for much of the book he is more of an observer than an actor. His words are distinguished by blue type—often without editorial comment—and Huets tends to use his prose to remark directly on an entry’s historical feature and his poetry to muse on it thematically (for example, see p. 49, where Huets thematically relates a passage on human identity in “Song of Myself” to the theories of Alexander von Humboldt). In the case of the latter, Huets’s editorial placement merely suggests the correlation: it is the reader who must assemble the critical connection based on his or her familiarity with the themes of Whitman’s poetry.

Principle sources credited by Huets include the digitized collection of the Library of Congress, books and photographs available on internet archives like Gutenberg, and other digital media. It could be said that the book seeks to integrate the ever-expanding Walt Whitman Archive—a major source throughout for photographs, manuscripts, printed texts, and criticism—with the proliferation of digitized nineteenth-Century media currently available online. The entries’ sequence in *With Walt Whitman: Himself* can feel like having multiple browser tabs open while searching the internet—all related content to be sure, but perhaps only tangentially so. Their unifying characteristic is the presence of “Walt” and the designation as being “the places and events and experiences that inspired and informed him and *Leaves of Grass*” (p.11). While many entries include the blue-text of his voice or references to their influence on Whitman, not all do, such as the entries for Herman Melville (p. 96), Women’s Rights (p. 142), Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and Harriet Tubman (p. 144-145). Pick any of these and one can find ample criticism by Whitman scholars and biographers; but Huets avowedly is not writing a “biography of Walt Whitman, nor a critique or analysis of his prose or poetry” (p. 11). Rather, she is stitching together the component pieces of a cultural biography, with emphasis on visual components. *With Walt Whitman: Himself* is, above all, an assemblage of entries, betraying, perhaps, the

book's origins as an interactive e-book.

Readers are aware of the constant American focus in the book, and so assemblage is thus a fitting approach to a history of Walt Whitman in America. Like the "teeming nation of nations," *With Walt Whitman: Himself* abounds in the disparate brought together. Despite Huets's claim that "Walt's poetry cannot be forced to an agenda or ideology," the book also argues that "he wanted his poetry to affirm and inspire his country" (15, emphasis added). Through assemblage, Huets succeeds in reproducing that multivalent and conflicted country, draping the 34-star 1861 flag on the cover over every entry in the book. Huets presents a view of *Leaves of Grass* consonant with Thoreau's observation, quoted on page 110, that "on the whole it is to me very brave and American."

University of Iowa

BRANDON JAMES O'NEIL

ÉRIC ATHENOT AND CRISTANNE MILLER, eds. *Whitman & Dickinson: A Colloquy*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. viii + 280 pp.

Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson were each born into families with long histories in rural communities. Both families experienced financial stresses during the poets' childhoods that removed them from family homes at a young age. Dickinson was two when her grandparents sold The Homestead on Amherst, Massachusetts' Main Street, and moved to Cincinnati. Her parents stayed on as tenants of the new owner for seven years, then bought a different home in Amherst, where they lived for another fifteen. For Whitman, the break was more extreme: he left school at age eleven, taking a job in Brooklyn. He moved between urban and rural settings throughout his childhood and youth, and from city to city in adulthood. While Dickinson was never so peripatetic, most of her known time away from Amherst took place during these 22 years. The story of Whitman's unsettlement accords easily with, and has perhaps animated, a familiar narrative of his life and work that combines loss of rural